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An Exploratory Study of the Meaning of Marriage for African Americans

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Using specific tenets from symbolic interactionism as a frame, we asked 31 African Americans (18 women and 13 men) including students as well as nonstudents, across a variety of types of relationships and ages, what marriage meant to them. Two major themes, commitment and love, emerged from qualitative content analysis of the meaning of marriage. Other themes, including partnership/friendship, trust, family, and covenant, also emerged as themes, although less frequently. The overwhelming meanings of marriage were positive, with only a few negative instances (i.e., marriage as unnecessary and not fulfilling). Supportive qualitative data are presented for each theme. We discuss implications for the meaning of marriage for African Americans.

KEYWORDS *African Americans, commitment, love, meaning of marriage, relationships, symbolic interactionism*

Notable changes in marriage and cohabitation have been taking place in the United States, with marriage rates decreasing and cohabiting rates increasing (Kreider & Elliot, 2009; Pinsof, 2002). For African Americans, rates of

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marriage have changed dramatically over previous decades. In 1970, 64% of adult African Americans were married; by 2004, however, only 32% of African Americans were married (Dixon, 2009).

Additionally, an increasing number of children are growing up in families outside of marriage, including single-parent or cohabiting families (Kreider & Elliot, 2009; Popenoe, 2009). The percentage of African American children living with a single parent in 1960 was approximately 25%, and in 2007 it was over 50% (Popenoe). In 2007, 71.6% of African American births were to unmarried women (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009). Traditionally, family has been defined in a more restrictive manner, limiting family to individuals related through blood or marriage, where marriage is between a man and a woman and precedes having children (Kreider & Elliot; Rothausen, 1998; W. N. Stephens, 1963). As a result of the shift away from such a meaning of family, as illustrated by the number of single-parent or cohabiting families and children born to unmarried women, African Americans may hold more nontraditional definitions of family.

When African American teens are surveyed, however, most express positive attitudes toward marriage (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). For example, 88% of African American teens reported that having a good marriage and family life was either "quite important" or "extremely important" to them (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Further, such positive attitudes toward marriage are not unique to African American teens. In a study of low-income, unmarried parents, including almost 50% African Americans, individuals reported that they planned to marry, advocated that "marriage is sacred," and stated that "getting married ought to be a serious and irrevocable decision" (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005, p. 1309).

The maintaining of positive attitudes toward marriage, coupled with a decrease in the number of African Americans marriages, suggests that there may be something unique as to how African Americans define the institution of marriage. To understand the discrepancy between declining marriage rates and anticipation for marriage, we argue that the meaning of marriage, as described by African Americans in their own words, is important to understand. Though marriage is something that fewer African Americans have chosen in recent decades, it still maintains significance. Given this focus on the meaning of marriage, symbolic interactionism (SI) is a useful theoretical framework to understand views of, and attitudes toward, marriage for African Americans. SI allows for the understanding of how the meaning of marriage is derived from interpretations of interactions with many others (family, friends, neighbors, community, society, culture, etc.) as well as symbols in the environment (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The purpose of the current study, then, is to use SI to assess the meaning of marriage for African Americans. Below, we use specific tenets of SI to understand the meaning of marriage for individuals more generally and then focus on the meaning of marriage for African Americans.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

According to Blumer (1969), three basic tenets of SI exist. The first tenet, and the one we focus on in the current study, is that individuals act toward symbols—things, physical objects, other people, categories, institutions, guiding ideals, activities of others, and everyday situations—on the basis of the meaning the symbol has for them. The second is that through interactions with others (such as family members, friends, relatives, neighbors, societal influences, etc.), these symbols take on meaning. Lastly, through an interpretative process, meanings are understood or modified to help individuals process symbols they encounter in their everyday lives.

Marriage, as an institution, is symbolic (Berger & Kellner, 1964). Meaning is created about this symbol of marriage through an interpretive process contingent upon interactions with others (Berger & Kellner). Furthermore, marriage is thought to provide an important “nomic” function, in which individuals from different backgrounds come together to create a reality that is consistent with the social norms and values that surround them and in which reality is created and reinforced, resulting in a feeling of belonging for the marriage participants (Bergner & Kellner). Marriage has been shown to have many benefits for physical and emotional health, including greater happiness, life satisfaction, and lower mortality, compared to unmarried individuals (for a review, see Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003).

Further, despite decreases in marriage and increases in cohabitation and unmarried parenting, family life, and especially marriage, remains important to individuals. For example, the great majority of individuals believe that marriage is for a lifetime and should not be ended except under extreme circumstances (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Also, the vast majority of young people are optimistic that once married, they will remain married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco) and agree that having a good marriage and happy family life is “extremely important” to them (Popenoe, 2009). Though cohabitation may be more acceptable for young adults, it is still not commonly viewed as a substitute for marriage (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007).

Children and adolescents model behavior about family formation based on what they see in their own families. Teens who live with both biological parents express the strongest support for marriage (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008), and women who live with both parents during childhood are less likely to experience the breakup of their first marriage than women raised without two parents during childhood (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). In contrast, children from divorced, stepparent, or single-parent households report lower expectations for marriage and have more positive attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1996). Such meanings of marriage will likely dictate how individuals view their own romantic relationships and influence future generations of individuals.

Beliefs about marriage and relationships have been explored in previous studies of adolescents or young adults, albeit in samples of predominately White college students (Carroll et al., 2009; Hall, 2006). For example, in one study, participants responded to a list of 30 statements about marriage (e.g., marriage is a sacred union that should be taken very seriously; Hall). From the study, five dimensions of marriage emerged, including marriage as a special status versus other types of relationships; mutuality; romantic ideals and beliefs; role hierarchies; and beliefs about self-fulfillment (Hall).

MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO AFRICAN AMERICANS

Because a major limitation of the aforementioned literature is that much of it is specific to White individuals, the remainder of our article focuses on African Americans. When race or ethnicity is considered, differences in marriage and beliefs about marriage become apparent. Although teens from different racial/ethnic groups share similar attitudes toward marriage (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008), different expectations emerge for the likelihood of marriage with the inclusion of race/ethnicity (Manning et al., 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Among high school students, African Americans are less likely than Whites to expect to get married (75 versus 86%, respectively) and to stay married to the same person (85 to 92%, respectively; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Similarly, African American teens have lower marital expectations compared to White teens (Crissey, 2005; Manning et al.).

These trends are not limited to teens. When considering adults, the percentage of African American women who have ever been married is lower for African Americans (61%) than other women (Whites, 88%; Hispanics, 85%), a pattern also seen by African American men (68%) compared to other men (Whites, 82%; Hispanics, 77%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Further, the decrease in rates of marriage by African American women is much more substantial than the decrease for White women (Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989). In addition, rates of remarriage are lower for African Americans than other races (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

African Americans' meanings of marriage are important to study because of their tenuous relationships to marriage. Popular culture depictions of African Americans are often of rancorous and unlovable individuals (hooks, 2001). However, declining marriage rates for African Americans are more attributable to social factors than stereotypes. A sex ratio imbalance suggests that there are fewer marriageable African American men than marriageable African American women. There are roughly "77 unmarried men to 100 women under age 40" (Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 273). Contributing to this sex role imbalance are high rates of incarceration and mortality for African American men (Dixon, 2009). For example, according to recent U.S.

Department of Justice statistics, incarceration rates of African American males more than quadrupled between 1980 and 2003 (Dixon).

In addition to the sex ratio imbalance, lack of male economic viability decreases marriage rates for African Americans. Marriage to a man who will not likely improve their economic standing makes little sense for African American women (Dixon, 2009; King & Allen, 2009). Unfortunately, other available African American men may also be lacking. That is, working and middle-class economically marriageable African American men are, more often than not, already married and may have preconceived stereotypes of African American women, such as “gold-diggers” or “baby mamas,” who are perceived as to be a threat to men’s financial stability (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Ralph, 2006; D. P. Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Greater societal acceptance of the decoupling of marriage and parenthood further reduce the need for marriage (Burton 1990; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Another possibility to explain decreased rates of marriage is that many African American men shy away from marriage and family until they feel that they have the financial means to support a family, which may come only later in life (Gibson-Davis et al.; Lawson & Thompson, 1999).

In contrast to the studies done on primarily White college students and their beliefs and meanings of marriage, studies done about African Americans are more difficult to find. Sometimes researchers include African Americans and Whites as points of comparison (e.g., Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998; Manning et al., 2007; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). If studies are done on African Americans, such studies focus on African Americans who are low income and facing issues related to poverty (Danziger & Lin, 2000) or are specific to parenting and not necessarily marriage (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007). Less frequently are studies done primarily on African Americans in terms of their beliefs and meanings of marriage. As exceptions, we discuss the studies by Chaney and Marsh (2009); King and Allen (2009); and Marks et al. (2008).

In the few studies that have been done on African Americans, several themes about the meaning of marriage have emerged. In a qualitative study on 30 married African American couples regarding their happy, enduring marriages, participants reported themes such as finding time for family given the demands of life and work; being able to rely or lean on a committed spouse; working through and being able to resolve intramarital conflict; and unity and trust between committed partners (Marks et al., 2008). In another qualitative study of cohabiting and married African Americans about when participants realized they were in a “coupled” relationship, emergent themes included relationship markers such as when couples moved in together or when they become engaged; affection and sex; having and rearing children together; and time and money (Chaney & Marsh, 2009). In one quantitative study, a significant percentage of African American adults identified ideal marriage partners as reliable, monogamous, affectionate, financially stable, and African American (King & Allen, 2009).

All of these studies are important in helping us understand the meaning of marriage for African Americans. To extend beyond this small but growing literature, in the current study, we ask African Americans about their meaning of marriage. We decided to remain singular in our focus and chose not to compare the responses of African Americans to other minority groups or to Whites. Unlike the previous studies reviewed, we ask this question of African Americans across relationships (those not in romantic relationships, or singles, and those who are married), across ages (19 to 55), and across samples (students and nonstudents). Instead of offering hypotheses, we use the first tenet of SI to frame our question about the meaning of marriage and to examine the respondents' emergent themes. Also to understand more about the meaning of marriage, we inquired about African Americans' attitudes toward the concept of a bad marriage versus no marriage at all, and for those who were not already married, we asked whether they would like to get married in the future.

METHODS

We recruited our sample through flyers distributed in various Family Studies and Human Development and Communication classes at the University of the first author, for which students could earn extra credit. Additionally, an electronic flyer about the study was distributed by the second author, although extra credit was not offered in this case. The sample described below was drawn from separate surveys for couples and for singles (i.e., those not currently in any kind of romantic relationship).

For the couples study, students were eligible to participate if they were in a romantic relationship for at least 6 weeks and both partners were 18 or older and were willing to participate. The study was not limited to African American individuals, although efforts were made to recruit African Americans through the collaboration of the second author. Students were encouraged to pass along recruitment flyers to other individuals (parents, roommates, siblings) if they did not match the description. For the singles study, students were eligible to participate if they were not currently in a romantic relationship and were 18 or older. Both surveys were completed online.

Participants

We gathered data from 39 African American individuals, although 31 had data on the marital meaning question described below. Therefore, the sample reported here is for 31 individuals: 18 women (58.1%) and 13 men (41.9%). As we note throughout the article, the sample size in our exploratory study is small. We offer descriptive statistics for our sample with a

cautionary note about making broad generalizations from the data. Of those in coupled relationships, 8 were married (25.8%) and 14 were not married (45.2%). Single status was reported by 9 people (29%). Of these 22 people who were coupled, there were 8 individuals whose partners also reported data. The age range was 19 to 55, with the median age of 22 and mean age of 29.32. A little over half (56.7%) of the sample were university students. Others reported as parents, partners, friends, coworkers, etc. All respondents were from the United States, with over half reporting that they lived in the states of the first and second author.

The median age of education was some college or an associate's degree (51.6%), with other education as graduation from high school (16.1%), bachelor's degree (9.7%), some graduate school (6.5%), master's degree (12.9%), and degree such as MD or PhD (3.2%). About a quarter (27.6%) of the sample had one or more children. Eight people (25.8%) reported being currently married. Of those who had children ($n = 8$), the majority ($n = 6$, or 75%) were married.

We also asked about current parental marital status, in which the largest percentage (41.4%) reported that their parents were married, followed by the category of "other" (22.6%), divorced and remarried (20.7%), divorced and single (6.5%), and live together but not legally married (6.5%). In terms of other marital statuses, responses ranged from parents not living together, long-distance relationships, parents never got married, no relationship, one parent divorced and single and the other parent remarried, parents were married until father passed away recently, and widowed.

On the online survey, we asked several questions, but the focus of the current study is on the identical question asked of both couples and singles. To assess meaning of marriage, we asked the following open-ended question: "What does marriage mean to you? That is, when you think about marriage, what do you think of, or how would you describe it?" Individuals typed their responses to this question, and it is those responses on which we base our analyses below.

We also asked individuals about plans to marry. Couples were asked, "If you are not married currently, would you like to get married?" Further instructions indicated, "Again, don't think about your current partner but just about marrying someone in the future in general." Singles were asked, "Not thinking about the present, but thinking about the future, would you like to get married?" Answer responses included yes, no, not sure, and other. To determine their attitudes about a bad marriage versus no marriage at all, we asked the following question of both couples and singles, "How much do you agree with the following statement: A bad marriage is better than no marriage at all." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with 3 in the middle (*neither agree nor disagree*). This item was taken directly from the Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale by Kinnaird and Gerrard (1986).

Plan for Analysis

For the open-ended question about meaning of marriage, the following process was used. Given that the online survey provided an option to type responses, no transcription was needed. The question we asked of participants was guided by the first tenet of SI, as were the coding of the themes. We purposely left the question broad because we wanted participants to answer the question in ways most meaningful for them.

To code the data, we used qualitative content analysis. This type of coding is generated primarily from the responses given by the participants and allows for the presentation of information in everyday language used by the participants (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative content analysis, then, allows for descriptive validity. Further, this type of coding allows for counting responses and the number of participants in each response category, with the idea that counting “is a means to an end, not the end itself” (Sandelowski, p. 338). Frequency of ideas, as associated with simple content analysis, was also an important consideration in identifying themes. While using this coding method it is typical to summarize data numerically with descriptive statistics, which we did above in the Methods section.

As a way to strengthen the coding of the interviews, Patton (2002) recommended “analyst triangulation” in which “two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings” (p. 560). The two first authors, one familiar with SI and one not familiar with SI, coded the data initially. The process for both coders involved reading the entire response of each person and then reading the response again, this time taking notes about possible categories of themes or points of interest. These notes were then put into a separate document, in which additional notes were added about each additional person. With these notes in hand, the two coders reread the responses and themes were noted in each person’s document as well as on a new page of the summary points. After all individuals were coded, the two coders met again to collectively discuss the major themes of the coding.

As another part of the analyst triangulation process, we asked the third author and two undergraduate research students who had knowledge of SI but no other knowledge about the participants’ (the students did not know the respondents were African American) data or study research questions to look for major themes in the data and code participants’ responses accordingly.

Between the two main coders and the three additional coders, two major themes emerged: commitment and love. Although less frequent in comparison to commitment and love, four other themes emerged across coders: partnership/friendship, trust, family, and covenant. In the Results section, we provide supporting examples of each of the six themes. We also note that the coding was not limited to one theme per individual; instead, it was much more common for individuals to list several themes about the meaning of marriage.

RESULTS

Before we discuss themes from the qualitative coding, we report results for the plans to marry and attitudes about a bad marriage versus no marriage at all. As we stated earlier, we note that the percentages discussed next are for descriptive purposes only, given the small sample size. After excluding individuals who were already married (25.8%, or $n = 8$), when asked about plans to marry, the overwhelming majority, 82.6% ($n = 19$), reported plans to marry; fewer (8.7%, $n = 2$) reported no plans to marry, and the same number (8.7%, $n = 2$) were not sure. No significant differences emerged when comparing those in coupled relationships (excluding marriage) and those who were single on plans to marry, $\chi^2(2) = 4.44, p > .05$.

To address attitudes about a bad marriage versus no marriage at all, we asked all participants to respond to the statement "A bad marriage is better than no marriage at all." The vast majority of respondents (77.4%, $n = 24$) stated that they strongly (61.3%, $n = 19$) or mildly (16.1%, $n = 3$) *disagreed* with the statement. Other responses included neither agree nor disagree (9.7%, $n = 3$), mildly agree (9.7%, $n = 3$), and strongly agree (3.2%, $n = 1$). Thus, for the vast majority of our sample, plans to marry were evident by individuals not currently married, and a bad marriage was disfavored versus no marriage at all.

Returning to the qualitative data, the responses from the participants are reported exactly as they were typed into the online survey including punctuation, typos, etc., with the exception of responses given in all capital letters, which are reported using lowercase sentences for easier reading, and italics, which we added for emphasis.

Theme 1: Commitment

Themes about commitment were stated by 15 individuals (10 females and 5 males). Of the women, 5 were in coupled relationships, and 5 were single. Of the men, 3 were in coupled relationships, and 2 were single. Regardless of gender, 8 were in coupled relationships and 7 were single. The age range for this theme was 19 to 50.

Truth and loyalty and the ability to *stick together through tough times*. (Female, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 21)

Union between man and woman; *commitment*; love; trust; friendship. *Pulling together through any situation and making the best of it*. (Female, married, age 27)

That you have a partner in life that you share the same interest with *and are willing to spend the rest of your life with*. *I think of my parents and their commitment to one another*. (Male, married, age 47)

Marriage means a *lifetime* of having a companion at your side, *ready to go to war with you*. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 22)

Two people sharing a *bond that they feel will last forever*. (Male, single, age 21)

spending the rest of your life with that person. (Male, single, age 19)

Marriage means *deciding and promising to spend the rest of your life with the person you love*. (Female, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 19)

Theme 2: Love

Themes about love were stated by 12 individuals (8 females and 4 males). Of the women, 5 were in coupled relationships, and 3 were single. Of the men, all 4 were in coupled relationships. Regardless of gender, 9 were in coupled relationships and 3 were single. The age range was 19 to 47.

It means a serious commitment between two individuals who *love* each other. I think of a happy couple who has minimal problems and *love being with each other*. (Female, single, age 20)

Family, *love*, understanding, partnership, friends. (Male, married, age 47)

Marriage is the *connection of love* that two individuals want to share in a sacred event that people do. its *claiming love for one another* in front of all your and her loved ones. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, 21)

I think that marriage is when 2 people *love each other* and commit to love each other for the rest of their lives. (Female, single, age 19)

unconditional love. (Female, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 19)

Security, *love*, thankfulness, warmth, work. (Female, married, age 31)

Theme 3: Partnership/Friendship

Themes about partnership and/or friendship were stated by 6 individuals (4 females and 2 males). Of the women, 3 were in coupled relationships and 1 was single. Of the men, both were in coupled relationships. Regardless of gender, 5 were in coupled relationships and 1 was single. The age range for this theme was 19 to 47.

Marriage is important to me. My husband and I have been married for 21 Years. He is *my partner and my best friend*. It is nice to live with my husband. (Female, married, age 45)

I would describe marriage as *two people becoming a "we."* *Living and experiencing life together* while sharing the good and the bad times. (Female, single, age 19)

family love understanding *partnership friends*. (Male, married, age 47)

Theme 4: Trust

Themes about trust were stated by 5 individuals (3 females and 2 males). Of the women, 1 was in a coupled relationship, and 2 were single. Of the men,

both were in coupled relationships. Regardless of gender, 3 were in coupled relationships and 2 were single. The age range for this theme was 19 to 27.

Marriage is *trust* and happiness between 2 people. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 20)

Commitment honesty *trustworthyness*. (Female, single, age 19)

Loving one person for the rest of your life and being committed to them.

Being able to trust your partner. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 21)

Theme 5: Family

Themes about family were stated by 5 individuals (2 females and 3 males). The 2 women were in coupled relationships. Of the men, all were in a coupled relationship. In other words, regardless of gender, all 5 individuals here were in coupled relationships. The age range for this theme was 29 to 55.

Having a family. Working hard to take care of them. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 29)

Family, compromises, sharing values and love. (Female, married, age 45)

Marriage is very important in our society and for *family and children*. A *good marriage is essential for bringing a well-rounded child*. A *good or bad marriage affects your children's future relationships*. (Female, married, age 55)

Theme 6: Covenant

Themes about covenant were stated by 4 individuals (3 females and 1 male). One woman was in a coupled relationship and the other 2 women were single. The one man was in a coupled relationship. Regardless of gender, 2 individuals were in coupled relationships and 2 were single. The age range was 20 to 55.

Covenant between 2 people. (Female, single, age 20)

I feel that marriage is . . . a *covenant under God* promising to love trust and cherish that person. (Female, single, age 20)

I think marriage is a picture of a person's relationship with God. (Female, married, age 55)

Marriage is the connection of love that two individuals want to share in a *sacred event* that people do. (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 21)

Finally, as can be seen in the discussion above, most responses were positive. Although some individuals talked about "tough times" these instances were usually in terms of commitment, love, or both. Although

not as common as the other themes, 2 individuals (1 male and 1 female) found the meaning of marriage to be unnecessary and not fulfilling, although even within their responses, they still discussed something positive about marriage. Their responses are below.

Marriage in theory is a great engagement that promotes family and community. However, based on my own experience and through observation of other married (male) friends, marriage falls short of its promises. I find that most people lack the preliminary skillset(s) for working as a team toward goals. Frankly, I feel that marriage does not offer any of the implied benefits (regular sex, emotional support, financial support, cooperation/teamwork). (Male, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 41)

A decision to make a commitment to one another to go through life together as partners. Marriage makes the commitment legal and acknowledged in our society. If not for the legal aspect, I wouldn't feel it's necessary. (Female, unmarried and in romantic relationship, age 50)

DISCUSSION

In spite of lowered marriage rates for African Americans in recent decades (Dixon, 2009), we find that meanings of marriage are overwhelmingly strong and positive among this sample. Not only did unmarried participants in the current study desire to marry in the future (82.6%), but the vast majority of our sample (77.4%) strongly or mildly disagreed with the statement "a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all." Only one person strongly agreed.

These positive views of marriage are in accordance with Symbolic Interactionism, or SI (Blumer, 1969), such that marriage is generally thought of in positive terms in the United States. The responses we received specifically addressed the first tenet of SI, which is how individuals act toward symbols, on the basis of the meaning the symbol has for them. Even though, behaviorally, rates have been changing in recent decades, positive attitudes and beliefs about marriage continue to be strong. Marriage in particular continues to be viewed positively, in our study as well as in other studies of marital meaning (Hall, 2006).

Several of the specific themes that emerged from our study resonate with previous research (Chaney & Marsh, 2009; King & Allen, 2009; Marks et al., 2008), yet our study was an important extension beyond previous research in that we assessed African Americans who were single as well as married, across various ages, and across samples, including both students as well as nonstudents. The major themes that emerged in the current study were that of commitment and love, with four other minor themes, which included partnership/friendship, trust, family, and covenant.

Commitment, or being able to rely or lean on a committed spouse, was an important theme in a qualitative study of African Americans in happy, successful marriages (Marks et al., 2008). The same was true in our study, with the largest number of responses in the form of commitment. As one example, the man who noted a marriage companion as “ready to go to war with you” anticipates not just life difficulties but further obstacles in life that must be won with help from the partner as an integral component. Although participants may have used slightly different words to describe commitment (i.e., lifelong, spend rest of life with, tough times, stick together, good and bad times, etc.), the theme of commitment was ultimately significant.

From an SI perspective, commitment should be a major theme in terms of the meaning of marriage. Despite the increasingly more prevalent option of cohabitation in the United States (Kreider & Elliot, 2009), individuals still consider marriage as most ideal for themselves and others (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), perhaps because commitment is an important component of marriage, as evidenced through symbols such as wedding vows. Further, the association of commitment in the meaning of marriage is supported by research that finds that the majority of individuals are optimistic that once married, they will remain married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco).

The next prominent theme was *love*. With the exception of bell hooks' work (2000, 2001, 2002), love is often understudied in African American relationships despite the fact that “[j]ust like every other population group, loving, nurturing, and supportive relationships are the cornerstone of strong Black families and communities” (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004, p. 634). In previous studies that have been conducted on marital meaning, love is a prevalent theme (Hall, 2006; Sprecher & Metts, 1999; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). Love has been deemed as especially foundational for marriage in individualistic Western cultures (Schafer, 2008; Sternberg & Beall, 1995).

From an SI perspective, love is a pervasive presence in many aspects of romantic relationships in the United States, as is evident in multiple interactions with others (parents, media, culture). Although love has not historically been important, the growing importance of love across the past 90 to 100 years has been documented (Coontz, 2006). Scholars have discussed how the mass media (e.g., television viewing, Segrin & Nabi, 2002; and magazines, Ward, 2003) influences the importance of love in relationships and in marriage.

Given that commitment and love were the two major individual themes of African Americans in the current study, we note here that several individuals listed both of these themes in their response of marital meaning, as exemplified by the following statement of one woman: “Marriage is a *commitment* to happiness and *love* between two people who *want to share the rest of their lives together*. I think about a *lifelong partner* to share

wonderful memories together and lots of meaningful times.” To explain these overlapping meanings of both commitment and love, Sternberg’s (1986) triangular theory of love, which includes intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment, is illustrative. Specifically:

It is important not to neglect the decision/commitment component of love just because it does not have the “heat” or “charge” of the intimacy and passion components of love. Loving relationships almost inevitably have their ups and downs, and there may be times in such relationships when the decision/commitment component is all or almost all that keeps the relationship going. This component can be essential for getting through hard times and for returning to better ones. In ignoring it or separating it from love, one may be missing exactly that component of loving relationships that enables one to get through the hard times as well as the easy ones. (p. 123)

Beyond these common themes of commitment and love, other themes of partnership/friendship, trust, family, and covenant emerged. The idea of the romantic other defined in our study as *partnership/friendship* has been one of the most frequently perceived reasons for successful long-term marriages, although it is not a central focus in the literature on African American marriages. For example, previous research has found that those who agree with statements that describe their spouse as their best friend or who like their spouse as a person were more likely to be in marriages lasting 45 years or longer (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). Even though our sample size is small, we find this theme of partnership/friendship to be more frequent for those in a romantic relationship ($n = 6$) versus for those who are single ($n = 1$). It may be that individuals who are in dating or married relationships realize the importance of their romantic other as a partner or friend, because this partnership or friendship sustains their relationship over time. From an SI perspective, partnership/friendship as part of the meaning of marriage may be something couples strive for, especially if they have seen such partnerships/friendships in those around them (parents, friends, neighbors, culture, media, etc.)

Trust was also stated by African Americans in the study by Marks et al. (2008), in which trust between partners was conceptualized as an interpersonal resource that enabled strong, happy, and enduring marriages. In previous research, African Americans, or more specifically African American women, have expressed concerns of trust with their spouses (Goodwin, 2003). However, when trust was reported by African American women, positive associations were seen with marital well-being (Goodwin). By definition, trust ensures that individuals take a leap of faith in their partner, as a way to determine whether the significant other is predictable, dependable, and for whom one can have faith (Holmes & Rempel, 1986). In contrast to the theme of

partnership/friendship, the theme of trust, albeit small in number, was stated by both those in coupled relationships and those who were single. Thus, from an SI perspective, trust as part of the meaning of marriage may be something that individuals look for in establishing a new relationship, as well as in deciding to continue an existing relationship.

The theme of *family* was also discussed. Although we previously argued that African Americans are more likely to define family nontraditionally, the majority of our sample contradicted this claim. When asked about their parents' marital status, the largest percentage of individuals reported that their parents were married or remarried (62.1%). This sense of family as part of the meaning of marriage is in accordance with SI because individuals learn about the meaning of marriage through both families of origin and families of creation. The family appears to be the primary cultural setting in which meanings about marriage are developed and learned (Hall, 2006; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Consider, for example, one man who noted that "I think of my parents and their commitment to one another." Behavior about family formation is often formed in individuals' own families (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

Interestingly, only one person from our small sample size of five *explicitly* defined family in terms of the inclusion of children. Other statements about family were made without specific mention of children (e.g., "family love understanding partnership friends"). In contrast, in the qualitative study of cohabiting and married African Americans, having and rearing children together was a major theme (Chaney & Marsh, 2009). Of the individuals who reported this theme of family in the current study, four out of five had a child, and three out of the five were married. From an SI perspective, the meaning individuals have of family may be that children are automatically included and need not be specifically mentioned. Future researchers, using either an online survey or an interview, may wish to ask about the meaning of marriage as we did and then follow-up with a question about how children are defined or thought about in terms of family.

Finally, the last theme was that of *covenant*. The importance of this construct was apparent in the ideal partner study by King and Allen (2009). When African Americans were asked about personal characteristics they desire in their ideal marriage partner, the characteristic of religiousness (constructed as high agreement with the statement "My ideal marriage partner is a member of a church/mosque and/or attends religious services regularly") was prevalent. Further, in the study by Marks et al. (2008), although not a separate theme in and of itself, marriage as a sacred vow was described as one way spouses resolved intramarital conflict. In a review of religion in families, marriage is recognized as a sacred, religious covenant (Mahoney, 2010). Further, in the study of long-term marriages (45 years or more) mentioned earlier, individuals listed marriage as a sacred institution as one of their top reasons to explain why they think their marriage has lasted over many

decades (Lauer et al., 1990). From an SI perspective, covenant as part of the meaning of marriage may be important, especially because African Americans are likely to meet their partners through social settings such as church or other religious functions or events (Lawson & Thompson, 1999).

Although no one individual listed all six themes in their response, several individuals tapped into multiple constructs in terms of marital meaning. As one example, consider the response of one woman who mentions commitment, love, trust, and covenant: "I feel that marriage is a *commitment* between two people who *love* each other very much and that it is a *covenant* under God promising to *love trust* and cherish that person." Or another woman who describes commitment, love, partnership/friendship, and trust in her response: "Union between man and woman; *commitment; love; trust; friendship. Pulling together* through any situation and making the best of it." From an SI perspective, such multiple meanings of marriage seem likely to result from the interpretations individuals derive from interactions with many others in their environment (parents, partner, family, culture, religion, etc.) and symbols in their environment, all of which convey a message of marriage being normative and valued to the individuals in the current study.

One theme that was not mentioned about the meaning of marriage was that of economics or socioeconomic factors. Given the range of ages and educational levels, the open-ended question about the meaning of marriage, the current period of economic instability in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009), literature that contextualizes the socioeconomic factors impacting African Americans (e.g., Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; King & Allen, 2009), and desire for a partner who earns more than the individual (King & Allen), it is surprising that finances or economic factors were not spontaneously generated.

Although we did not ask about income in the current study, education is often used as a proxy for income (Almeida, Neupert, Banks, & Serido, 2005). In our study, education levels were relatively high. That is, the median age of education was some college or an associate's degree (51.6% of the sample). Thus, it may be that finances and economic factors are not spontaneously generated for those individuals reporting higher, versus lower, education and that other nonmaterial meanings of marriage, such as commitment, others beyond partner, and love, are more salient.

That being said, in the study by King and Allen (2009), economic status emerged as a salient characteristic for an ideal marriage partner among African American respondents, although several questions were asked about finances that may have primed individuals to think about finances (e.g., My ideal marriage partner is financially stable). On the other hand, in the qualitative study of African Americans by Chaney and Marsh (2009), finances also emerged as a salient characteristic, without specific questions specified about finances. This latter sample, however, was also lower income, a relevant characteristic given the authors' discussion that, for lower income individuals, willingness to pool resources may be a necessary part of partner

compatibility. Thus, the importance of finances should not be disregarded, even though we did not find finances to be spontaneously generated in terms of the meaning of marriage here.

The limitations of the current study should be noted. Given that SI is comprised of several tenets, we chose to focus on the first one, which is how individuals act toward symbols, on the basis of meaning the symbol has for them. Future researchers should explore the other tenets of SI, including how these symbols take on meaning as well as how, through an interpretative process, meanings are understood or modified to help individuals process symbols they encounter in their everyday life.

As with many qualitative studies, including the ones reviewed here, the small sample size was a major limitation. These exploratory findings are merely a starting point for future studies. Although participants were drawn from more than one city and state, most of the viewpoints were from the Western part of the United States, which still limits the generalizability of the current results. Additionally, several individuals ($n=8$) completed the quantitative portions of the survey but not the open-ended question about the meaning of marriage. The self-selection inherent in our sample includes those with the time and inclination to thoroughly respond to open-ended questions. How the views of the quantitative respondents would have been similar to or different from those of the current participants is unknown. Although we had several matched couples in the current study, and roughly equal numbers of men and women, couple data, as well as more data from African American men, would be important because typically the views of these latter individuals are underrepresented in research on marriage and marital meaning (Coley, 2001).

One of the most common limitations of research on marital meaning is the lack of diversity of the sample, with many studies consisting of White college students. In contrast, our study of marital meaning for African Americans was diverse in terms of types of relationships, age, and student status. The focus of our study was not to compare our results to those of White college student samples. Instead, our goal was to contextualize the meaning of marriage for African Americans using their own words. We find the meaning of marriage for African Americans to be overwhelmingly strong and positive. The majority of individuals disfavored a bad marriage versus no marriage at all, and for those unmarried individuals, marriage is a plan for the future. Emerging from our open-ended question using Symbolic Interactionism is the conclusion that the meaning of marriage was positive, as illustrated by major themes of commitment and love, followed by more minor themes of partnership/friendship, trust, family, and covenant. Even for those individuals who responded with negative meanings of marriage, their responses also contained positive themes. In sum, despite the statistics, the African Americans in our study describe marriage in their own words as a valued, meaningful, and overwhelmingly positive institution.

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